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Bananas, Elves, Trolls, Vikings, and Hidden People: An Ethnography of Icelandic Folklore and Their Impact on the Icelandic Identity

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Iceland is one of the few countries considered to be Western that actively still circulates tales of folklore and mythical beings. Whether this is because of their dedicated belief or if these tales are told solely for the sake of tourism is up for debate depending on who you talk to. During my time in Iceland, I witnessed people discussing mythical beings, like elves, trolls, and hidden people, with both reverence and with the cadence of a joke. The influence of these beings is still strongly depicted in the dispute over the validity of their existence.

"And here is the biggest banana plantation in Europe" was the first piece of Icelandic folklore I encountered during my fieldwork while I was in Iceland. Bará[1], our tour guide for the day, had just proudly pointed to a greenhouse in the town of Reykir which is at the base of a mountain outside the capital region. It was a phrase I'm sure Bará had stated during every tour she has given in this region, and one that gained a snicker from the audience every time because surely a country known for its snow and ice could not possibly supply the most bananas to a majority of Europe. Officially Spain is Europe's largest producer of bananas, producing over 417,176 tons, thus being the more logical option (Fresh Plaza: www.freshplaza.com). This creation of the modern folklore of Iceland's immense banana output to Europe is a fresh take on the ways that Iceland has long tried to create its own reality and attempt to control how the country is viewed through the myths and the folklore about elves, trolls, and hidden people[2]. This essay will explore how the mythological stories and folklore of elves, trolls, and hidden people have impacted the Icelander's perception of their own identity and how it is still the driving force behind their respectful relationship with nature that they are often stereotyped to have, despite their advancement in the fields of science.

This ethnography was inspired by the assumption set forth by Alfred L. Kroeber who states, "On the one hand culture can be understood primarily only in terms of cultural factors, but that on the other hand no culture is wholly intelligible without reference to the non-cultural or so-called environmental factors with which it is in relation and which condition it" (Kroeber 1969: 351). To be noted, English was not the first language of those interviewed. Consequently, the challenge of translation affected not only the interviewing processes, but the integrity of the oral tradition. Therefore, I compared different interviews about the same folklore to written pieces to gain clarity (Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990: 2).

In all of my interviews, I asked interviewees what they thought it means to be Icelandic. The response Þorður (Thor)[3], the man who kindly drove me from Reykjavik to Heydular, gave spoke to the globalised world that has emerged in recent years. He deemed that to be Icelandic one has live in Iceland and attempt to learn the language for it is a key part of the culture (Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990: 2). He stressed the importance of people broadening their minds in order to dismantle traditional imagery in regards to Icelandic identity. Gunnthor[4], a musician employed in a public

restroom that had been converted into a punk rock museum, had similar feelings despite not being a native to Iceland. He describes the Icelandic psyche to be one that is made up of resilience and constant growth, drawing similarities to that of the punk rock attitude. The oral tradition that was practiced by the first Icelanders kept the culture and people alive through cold times (Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990: 2). Despite originally hailing from another Scandinavian country, Gunnthor was quite fascinated with the Icelandic Saga for he considered those who "were a little off track are the true Icelanders. They [the witches, storytellers, believers in the folklore, those openly against the Vikings] were the punks of those days." The Icelandic Sagas are records kept by unknown authors from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that supposedly accurately depicted the lives of prominent families, settlers, and important events during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries with poems about heroic Icelanders interspersed between stories. They have been labelled as myths but have heavily influenced not only the Icelanders relationship with their own history but also the way that Icelandic people interact with each other, the environment, and the over three million tourists that visit every year. The Icelandic people use these stories to interact with a history that continues to radiate of a shame they cannot escape, for there is often no resolution found in blame.

The Icelandic Sagas tell readers tales of Vikings braving the elements, slaughtering people, and conquering their corner of the world. This description of Icelanders being resilient and unbreakable was a constant theme in every conversation I held with an Icelandic person, whether we were discussing the weather, the horses, or the crop yield. Belonging to such a proud nation has been uplifting for many while allowing them to ignite this 'rebel blood' that runs through all Icelanders, whether they are Icelandic due to genetics, postcode, or heart.

The Icelandic people have used their myths to help them understand how the world works, similarly to how the Christians have used God as an explanation for the creation of all things within the knowable universe. Due to Icelanders practicing the nature of oral tradition, their folktales were not written down until many centuries past the story's conception, thus leaving time for them to be manipulated to fit the needs of the newer society (Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990: 2).

This can be seen in the stories surrounding the explanation of the origin of the elves, which are beings known for playing pranks and interfering with human activity ranging from construction to farm maintenance. The story of the origin of the elves speaks of God coming down to Earth to visit Adam and Eve where He received a tour of their home and was introduced to their children. God had asked, knowing Eve would lie, if these were all of their children, for Eve did not finish washing them before He arrived; this led her to hide them away because she did not want to offend Him (Simpson 1972: 14-15). Though God had known this and stated "that had to be hidden from Me, shall also be hidden from men" thus causing them to disappear before their parents' eyes (Simpson 1972: 14). God's actions had led to the children becoming invisible, thus becoming descendants of the elves and hidden people while humans descended from the rest of Adam and Eve's children (Simpson 1972: 14-15).

Icelanders' relationship with religion is unique because while the nation and a majority of its inhabitants practice Christianity, the ideas that are present within the folklore are still key within their culture and influence religion. It is said that the biggest lava field was created after the

nation decided to become Christian. The pagan gods were so angry that they caused one of the largest volcanic eruptions the nation has ever seen. This caused many to believe they had made the wrong choice, but the nation still continued to practice pagan beliefs.

Thor recalls his father always telling him as a child that he would "much rather prefer to be [known as] an Irish slave than a Norwegian criminal." Bará held a similar outlook; she explained to me that when the Vikings were making their way to Iceland they had stopped in Ireland to pillage towns for supplies and slaves (Markelova 2017: 410). Unlike many tourists, I was unaware of the history of the country I was visiting. Despite my naivety being purposeful in an attempt to stop myself from forming any concrete assumptions about the Icelandic people before my fieldwork, that is not often the case for tourists visiting the small country for they are attracted by the Blue Lagoon, picturesque landscape, and nightlife rather than the strong history. A fellow tourist in a moment of pure curiosity had asked Bará, What makes you most proud to be coming from Iceland? to which Bará responded, I come from slaves. It isn't much to be proud of. We survive. We are still surviving despite the expenses. We are an optimistic country despite it all. It was as if all of the air was taken out of the bus with the audible gasp the first woman made after the mention of slaves. As an American, she struggled with this answer due to the lack of reclaiming of her history on Bará's part that Americans are used to in the dialogue pertaining to slavery.

Bará told me of a story about a cliff outside of her home town which is often referred to as an elf city by those living nearby. The area that is surrounded by grassy plains with burrows in the side of the small cliff, which are said to be left by elves, is treated like a playground by the local children as a way for them to discover their small corner of the world and connect with nature. She recalls spending a large amount of her time near the burrows when she was a child claiming that she liked the shade and the patterns of the earth but the elders of her area tell a different story. During one of her visits back to her hometown as an adult, the elders informed her that the reason why she would spend so much time near the burrows was because she would talk to "her invisible friend," telling her she does not remember because the elf had wiped her memory. They may have told her this story because of Bará's accidental mistreatment of the environment given her young age, or that she was at the age when children begin to doubt the existence of the elves and hidden people. And while Bará has no memory of her childhood friend, she does remember that a majority of the lessons she learned about respecting the environment took place near that cliff.

The stereotypical protective, loving attitude of the Icelanders towards nature is a learned trait that is not likely to be replicated in a larger nation. When asked how they felt about the iconic landscape of Iceland and how it has changed over time, from both natural process and human intervention, it was interesting to see the different responses. Those who came from and lived in the capital area tended to answer my question with more scientific terms leading me to believe that they were drawing upon basic information that was ingrained within them during their school days. This response was very different than the ones I received of those that lived outside of the capital area. Those normally consisted of personal accounts with nature and how important it is personally rather than as just a resource. They linked the environment's existence and its ability to thrive to their own identity.

Ragnheiður[5], a woman who managed

The Troll's Seat seen from the mountain rest stop above Ísafjörður.

multiple farms by herself, described her belief in Icelandic folklore as the reason for not only her strong relationship with nature but also for her ability to continue being a farmer despite a lonely existence. This belief in folklore gives her a stronger relationship with nature because it ensures the existence of other beings in the landscape, and inspires her to better care for the natural world. Ragnheiður described this awareness of the elves and hidden people as physical. With elves, one can rely on sight and knowledge of where their area of the land is, while with hidden people there is a specific smell that charges the air causing her hair to stand on end and goosebumps to ensue.

There is a crossroads of belief occurring in certain places. Ísafjörður and its surrounding towns have suffered from avalanches despite the belief in the presence of elves and trolls protecting the town. As one of my informants relayed to me, trolls sit within a large depression that is made in the side of the mountains at night to keep watch. The seat was created after a troll, who was running back home before the sunlight could turn her into stone forever, was saved by a solar eclipse for which humans took credit. She decided to sit down and enjoy the extra hours of night-time while washing her feet in the fjord. Despite the general belief in elves and trolls inhabiting the nearby mountains, the town no longer relies on their protection alone. Because one of the towns lost several citizens due to an avalanche, they have built an avalanche research centre. While they continue to use the myths to teach children about the environment, they now rely heavily on science for it provides them with agency and allows for their impact to be seen in a similar way. Anna[6], a woman from the avalanche centre, spoke of her relationship with nature as a very complicated one. She stressed the importance of respecting nature but that it is not a choice, for if you do not actively treat it well or listen for signs something will go wrong because "you do not need fairytales of trolls coming to kill you when natural disasters will." She seemed to envy the idea of entertaining the possibility of believing elves, trolls, and hidden people but never officially said she did not believe in them out of respect for those around us and her country's culture.

Though the discussion of weather did not start as just a form of small talk, it was originally used to discuss hunting and scavenging. It has now transformed into discussions of travel especially due to the extreme weather conditions of Iceland. When driving from the capital area to the Westfjords, Thor pointed out how the landscape had adapted over time to accommodate Icelanders' relationships with weather. There were originally varða, or rock piles, that marked the best places to fish. They then moved more inland as the Icelandic economy relied less on the fishing industry, causing more people to become farmers, so the varða became a way to not only mark boundaries between properties and worked as an in-between house to keep sheep herders warm but also

as road markers for travellers. Those that are built between farms often have a gap in them pointing towards the next farm. But over time, it became more obvious that during extreme weather the varða became dangerously hidden considering the extreme conditions that cars are driven through mountain roads. The modern versions are bright, orange poles, measuring a few feet high, paired with the weather cameras. These cameras are placed every few kilometres within the countryside because the weather is known to change every few minutes, allowing the drivers to check the conditions of the road before they venture out. Ósk[7] is a salt worker at a start-up in the Westfjords and was just a few years out of college, making her the youngest person I interviewed. She described her relationship with nature as a respect because of a fear for it. That fear acted as a controlling mechanism, for it dictated when one was allowed to do anything. Having a career that uses nature allows her to take back some of the agency it often steals.

Stella[8], an inn keeper in Heydular, told me a story about a troll that used to live nearby. He was a fishing troll named Đrandur who was caught by the sun while out catching fish for himself and his family. He was having so much fun on his boat out on the fjords that when the sun started peeking out from behind the mountains, Đrandur had only just made it to shore. A nonbeliever like Stella feels compelled to tell this story because the rock formation looks exactly like a man's face placed upon a crouched body as if he was trying to hide from the sun. Though she is a self-described non-believer, Stella, like many others, emphasised the need to respect those who did believe. Her act of spreading the story was a sign of respect for not only believers but the beings themselves, for she concluded on multiple occasions that she did not possess the authority to distinctively determine the status of their existence.

Despite the geographical isolation of the nation, the country as a whole seems to be very aware of the political climate of the world. Interviewees expressed their fears for their nation in relation to climate change. They spoke with an urgent tone that often falls on the deaf ears of tourists. Their willingness to discuss such issues made me wonder if it was due to my identity as an anthropologist conducting fieldwork or if they felt it was part of their duty as citizens to share their nation's concerns with tourists thus becoming an advocate for greener living along the way.

Care for their environment is especially significant because it has become interwoven into the pattern of the social life of an Icelandic citizenship (Duncan 1969: 465). While the increase of damage caused by climate change has acted as a catalyst, this behaviour would still be present because of rapidly fluctuating daily temperatures in Iceland. An understanding and connection to nature is imperative for physical and social survival. When looking at the constant way in which Iceland perpetuates myths that have shaped their culture, I recognised that most of the bananas that are produced by Spain are actually produced on the Canary Islands which technically belongs to the continent of Africa, another fact proudly

Đrandur, the fishing troll, outside of Heydular

relayed by Bará, and later fact-checked by Google (Fresh Plaza Staff; Helgason 2016). The modern adaptations of folklore, like banana output, has as much of an impact on Icelanders as traditional Icelandic folklore about elves, trolls, and hidden people does. It has not only impacted the Icelanders' relationship with nature by forcing them to create a relationship that is not solely dependent on science, while also causes them to have an identity, as citizens and as a nation, that will reflect these pieces of folklore. Because folklore is the foundation for Icelanders' relationship to each other and their environment, these stories, whether they be regarded as truth or myth, will continue to be told for generations to come.

NOTES

1. Her name has not been changed.
2. I feel that it is important to note that elves and hidden people are often linked together when discussed in literature, but when they are spoken about there were specific difference made between them. My paper will reflect this speech rather than similar text so that I can accurately depict interviewees' thoughts and feelings about each being.
3. His name has not been changed he and prefers to go by Thor, like the Norse god of storm-weather.
4. His name has not been changed.
5. Her name has not been changed.
6. Her name has been changed.
7. Her name has not been changed.
8. Her name has not been changed.

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